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## Are Sub-Governors Leaders or Bureaucratic Managers in Turkey?

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### Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that Turkish public administration, with its centralized, hierarchical, rule driven bureaucratic structure and administrative style, is unable to adjust effectively to current developments requiring strong and effective leadership. In this context, the leadership skills of the sub-governors as top level district managers in Turkish administrative system are significantly important on which this study focuses. Accordingly, the paper presents a short review of the current structure and problems of Turkish public administration. Then, it discusses the findings of a survey conducted with 325 sub-governors, indicating that sub-governors exert leadership in their jobs despite several obstacles.

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### 1. Introduction

International and national developments, ICT revolutions and rapid political, social and economic changes in recent decades have necessitated public or private organizations to adapt to these changes. Besides, increased needs, expectations and standards, requirements by EU, WTO etc. also require improvements in the management and provision methods of public services. If these challenges are not met sufficiently, public or private organizations cannot successfully compete in global economy and provide efficient, effective, timely and quality services to their clients.

Turkey has taken important steps towards reforming its public administration in order to meet the abovementioned challenges especially since the 1980s. Yet, the pace of the change was not as high as one would have expected (Hicks, 2001: 78). Particularly an autocratic administrative style focusing on status-quo, obedience and risk minimization along with a centralized and statist structure (Heper & Keyman, 1998, p. 259) seems to have slowed down the success of such reforms and the adaptation of the public organizations to rapid change. Rapid change and need for managing this change adequately require strong organizational and transformational leadership in public administration as well as in private sector companies. In today's competitive yet interdependent global world, leaders have to have such skills as environmental consciousness, networking, collaboration, teamwork, entrepreneurship, ability to lead the change and transform the organization and followers with a vision (Bass, 1999;

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Burns, 1978; Gökçe, 2007, p. 45; Gül & Alican 2007, p. 490; Keskin, 2009, pp. 125-127). Besides, effective leaders see their organizations as a system involving many interdependent and cooperating sub-systems (Barth, 1996, p. 195; Kuhnert, 1993, p. 199; Peker & Aytürk, 2000, pp. 55-60).

This paper focuses on management styles and leadership in the Turkish public administration system with a specific emphasis on the sub-governors considered to be the top level managers in the districts as the administrative units under the provinces in Turkey. It is important to specify their problems and possible solutions to these problems because the sub-governors have important responsibilities as the top managers in their districts and are the candidates for future governorships and other top level managerial positions in the public and private sectors. Accordingly, the paper first presents a short overview of Turkish public administration system. Second, it gives a brief review of the contemporary problems and reform efforts in Turkish public administration. And last, the paper discusses the findings of a survey conducted with 325 sub-governors. The results of the study identify the obstacles for leadership in the sub-governorship and their causes, and provide important insight into the ways of improving the capacity and opportunities of sub-governors for effective leadership.

## **2. Administrative structure in Turkey**

Turkey has had a strong state tradition and centralized administrative system with a system of tutelage by the national government over local governments since the Ottoman times (Heper & Keyman, 1998, p. 259). Thus, local autonomy has always been limited and local governments have not developed to become powerful administrative bodies in Turkey (Gül, 2008; Heper, 1992). According to 1982 Constitution, Turkish public administration system is based on the coexistence of the principles of ‘centralization’ and ‘decentralization.’ In this system, local administrations as public corporate entities have to be there, but it is up to the central government to determine the level of their power and autonomy. Similarly, Article 123 of the Constitution provides that all local and central administrative units and bodies should function in unity and coherence according to the rule of “unitary state” in order to maintain integrity in public administration in terms of organizations and duties. Thus, local governments are called as “local administrations” in Turkey despite the fact that decision making (councils) and executive bodies (mayors) of these local administrations are all elected by popular vote and the autonomy of local administrations has increased in recent years as a result of administrative reforms.

The central government also reaches out to the localities and regions through its local branches. The Constitution states that the layers of the central administration include provinces and districts determined according to geographic and economic conditions as well as the need for public services. According to Article 123 of the Constitution, the principle of “*de-concentration*” within the organizational hierarchy of the central administration is also employed and, thus, some powers and resources of the central administration is transferred to its local branches and officials.

Turkey is divided into 81 provinces and the provinces are also divided into around 950 districts. A governor is a strong executive figure appointed by the central government, and runs and supervises the whole provincial administration. A sub-governor is the head of a district. Both the governor and sub-governor have responsibilities as the agents of the central government and oversee the local branches of the central agencies and ministries. Besides, they represent the interests of their provinces or districts. Especially the governor, as the head of the special provincial administration, an autonomous local government body with a popularly elected council, acts to stand for local interests. There is further an executive board made up of the heads of the local governmental departments of the ministries and central agencies to carry out the functions of the central government at the local level and supervised by a governor.

## **3. Problems in Turkish public administration, reform efforts and approaches**

It is widely acknowledged that Turkish public administration has been unable to follow and adjust effectively to current developments in today’s rapidly changing, global environment. The main reason for this is that Turkish administrative system has been beset with such problems as rigid and rule driven structure and procedures, inefficiency and excessive red-tape, centralist and excessively bureaucratic traditions, partisanship and favoritism in

public employment, promotion and training systems, mismatches in skills and positions, among others (Gül & Alican 2007, pp. 472, 480-481; Gökçe, 2007). Besides, there is a gap between the need for and the number of top managers with leadership skills and a need for efforts to close this gap in Turkish public administration. Moreover, even if there are such leaders, the environment, superiors, politicians and rule driven procedures prevent them from taking any initiatives, exerting their entrepreneurial skills, and being result and production oriented. Yet, an autocratic administrative style focusing on status-quo and risk minimization seems to dominate public sector limiting efficiency and effectiveness of the public organizations (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2007, pp. 853-854). Thus, there has been a strong need for administrative reform to increase the capacity to deliver public services and lead economic development efficiently and effectively (Çelenk, 2009, p. 50).

Turkey has taken important steps towards reforming its public administration in order to meet today's challenges. However, the process of reform has gained a new momentum in Turkey particularly since 1999 when Turkey was officially announced at the Helsinki Summit a candidate country for EU membership and at the same time hit by a very strong earthquake and economic and political crises. International and national changes such as neoliberal globalization, revolutions in ICTs, increased and diversified citizen demands, absolute and rigid administrative structures, procedures and regulations, Kurdish problem, among others, all force Turkish governments to reform the administrative and political systems and bring them up to the international standards (Aydın & Keyman, 2004; Cılga, 2004; Sallan Gül, 2006). Accordingly, new reforms and methods in public administration have been introduced (Ömürgönülşen, 2003; Özer, 2005) especially after the establishment of the first AKP Government in 2002, which declared itself as a reform government and explicitly stated its will in realizing a comprehensive administrative reform package covering a broad range of issues and sectors (OECD & EU, 2007). Particularly, the decision made on 3 October 2005 about the opening of the negotiations between Turkey and the EU has stimulated the motives of administrative reform in Turkey. These reforms were justified with the emerging need for democratic governance, a stable political structure, and active, efficient, decentralized and flexible public administration to facilitate economic development and democratization in accordance with the EU norms (Aydın & Keyman, 2004).

The recent wave of administrative reform in Turkey includes the reforms of the central, regional and local administrations, and of their relations among themselves and with the market and society. In this context, one of the important areas for reform is the governorships. Especially, the leadership skills of the sub-governors or administrators as the top level managers in their districts in Turkish administrative system spanning a broad area of service delivery are significantly important for organizational change and economic development and an effective and efficient administration and provision of public services (Bedük, 2011).

This study does not get into a discussion of leadership theories and reform approaches in public administration. However, the reader should be aware of the fact that the discussions could be considered to fall under the framework of the general theories on public management reform, which mainly includes the New Public Management (NPM) and the New Public Governance (NPG) paradigms today (Ferlie, 2012, p. 237). Ferlie (2012, p. 243) argues that these two paradigms present entrepreneurship or leadership in public administration as a reform instrument to accomplish the goals of service modernization, strategic change and capacity rebuilding particularly in the public administration in the United Kingdom. An opposition to seeing public administrators as mere entrepreneurs comes from Barth (1996) in the United States. Barth agrees that autocratic management styles have to be changed to more participative, bottom-up styles; and that entrepreneurialism may offer new solutions and flexibility in this respect. Yet, public administrators have to go beyond viewing citizens as customers and acting on the base of competition and risk taking stimulated by entrepreneurialism, and foster public interest, educate citizens and facilitate citizen participation, manage diversity and change properly and responsibly, and utilize teamwork and communication (Barth, 1996). Thus, considering that leadership is context-sensitive, the issue should be specifically studied in Turkey if one wants to come to any conclusions about how management reforms influence leadership styles in Turkish public administration. This study only provides some insights regarding leadership among sub-governors in Turkey and offers some policy implications for reform in Turkish public administration.

#### 4. Research method, data and scope of the study

The results of the study is based on data coming from an exploratory study that was conducted with the goal of finding out the views of sub-governors on leadership and their problems as the top managers of the districts in Turkey. The main hypothesis of the research was that “sub-governors cannot exert a strong leadership due to a lack of appropriate organizational environment, capacity, incentives, rules and procedures.” The data were gathered by a survey with 325 sub-governors working throughout Turkey in 2010. Almost all of the interviewed sub-governors were male since governorship and sub-governorship are both highly male dominated careers in Turkey.

As the main instrument of data collection in the survey, a questionnaire was used and it included demographic questions (first three questions) and open-ended questions (the last fifteen questions). In the open-ended questions, the sub-governors were asked to mark one of the four options (“agree”, “partly agree,” “partly disagree,” and “disagree”) to show what they thought about the statement provided to them. The options were limited to four in order not to take much of the sub-governors’ time since they are often very busy and do not have time to read such questionnaires. In addition, it was expected that organizing the questionnaires as short and simple as possible would increase their return rate.

#### 5. Main research findings and discussion

55% of the 325 interviewed sub-governors agreed with the statement of “being an administrator does not mean being a leader” whereas 30.5% of them partly agreed with this statement and 14.5% disagreed with it. In general, 85.5% of the participant sub-governors could be considered to somewhat agree with this statement. This finding indicates that the sub-governors are aware of and admit the difference between being an administrator and a leader. Similarly, 89% of the sub-governors somewhat disagreed with the statement that “sub-governorship is not a career requiring leadership.” This result also upholds previous finding and shows that the sub-governors tend to see their position as requiring leadership. Yet, there were still other 36 sub-governors (11%) who disagreed with this statement. The main reasons for their disagreement included such issues as “inadequate resources and capacity to act as a leader”, “difficulty in taking risk and initiative due to inspections”, “a lack of encouragement or incentives for leadership”, “the risk of conflict with local politicians”, among others.

When the sub-governors were asked about what they thought of the statement that “A majority of the sub-governors in Turkey do not possess leadership skills”, 37.5% of the 323 respondent sub-governors disagreed with this statement. Yet, 11% agreed and 51% partly agreed with the statement, indicating that the sub-governors themselves have some doubts about their own leadership capacity. Considering the answers to another statement regarding training, 56% of the 324 interviewed sub-governors indicated that training sub-governors would contribute enormously to improve their leadership skills and success. Another 32% declared that they also happened to somehow believe that training would be beneficial to sub-governors in improving their leadership capacity. Thus, there is a clear need for continuous leadership training for sub-governors.

In their answers to another question, the sub-governors declare that they were *not* encouraged to exert leadership or take initiatives or risks. 83% of the 325 interviewed sub-governors somewhat agreed on this issues whereas only 17% disagreed. Similarly, 39% of the 325 sub-governors agreed with the statement that “The fact that rules are more important than performance and success makes it unnecessary to take a leadership role in their job.” 43% partly agreed with this statement while 18% disagreed. Another statement to explore the views of the sub-governors on leadership was that “Governorship and sub-governorship are established according to the rules of bureaucratic administration.” 47% of the 324 interviewed sub-governors agreed with this statement and 41% partly agreed with it. Thus, 88% of them seemed to somehow agree with this statement. This finding provides further support for the establishment of leadership oriented climate. Accordingly, it is important to eliminate the rules and procedures that prevent sub-governors from taking more initiatives, and foster a leadership culture and climate. Yet, as some sub-governors point out, it is also important to obey with rules and make powerful persons or groups and local elites or politicians comply with the rules in many cases. Otherwise, trust and neutrality in public administration would fade.

Another important problem in Turkish public administration system is the lack of an impartial public recruitment, employment, promotion and training system. This problem has resulted in the appointment of unqualified people

into some public positions and has had adverse effect on the quality of services and public management. Besides, the lack of continuous training as mentioned above seems as one of the factors that have hindered leadership and prevented effective management and service delivery. Regarding the statement provided to the sub-governors for their opinion that “The system of employment and promotion of sub-governors is inadequate to hire people with leadership skills”, 50.5% of them agreed and 36% partly agreed with this statement. This indicates a strong agreement on the inadequacy of the system of employment and promotion of sub-governors in Turkey. Another related question on this issue was about the salaries of the sub-governors. 40% of the 323 interviewed sub-governors agreed and 35% of them partly agreed with the statement that “the salaries of sub-governors are not good enough to attract people with leadership skills into this career.” There is 25% who disagreed with this statement. This finding indicates that the financial benefits offered to the sub-governors and the system of their employment and promotion have to be improved in order to attract more skillful persons and to better motive the actively working sub-governors.

Despite the negative tone of the abovementioned findings, 93% of the 323 interviewed sub-governors declared that they tried to exert leadership and took initiative and risk despite apparent threats involved and the lack of enough incentives. This finding indicates that the sub-governors have idealistic and altruistic attitudes when they try to do their jobs. They attempt to apply their leadership skills in their job by taking initiatives and risks even though a majority of the sub-governors think that they work in a rule driven, politicized and bureaucratic rather than results, performance and success oriented administrative system, and that they are not encouraged, paid or rewarded well. A sub-governor’s words illustrate this point well: “If you work hard and take some risks to develop the district or city that you manage and to increase the welfare of the residents, you face threats from auditors, superiors or politicians. If someone complains about you to your superiors or politicians, you may go through several audits and trials or you may be subject to a fast rotation and assigned to another district. So if you want to act as a leader and take initiatives and risks, you have to feel all right with all these threats. Many sub-governors who have gone through similar processes get frustrated and start to care more about rules and procedures than results, development or public welfare. I took initiative in the public’s benefit and spent two years on trial in the courts.” Similarly, another sub-governor stated his views as follows: “The position we occupy naturally means that we are leaders. Leaders get things done, not broken. They realize their goals despite obstacles and difficulties and never say “only if.” Leaders take initiatives and risks not just to manage the daily routine but to achieve some goals. Yet, in Turkish public administration system, it is almost a rule that how hard you work determines how much difficulty and obstacle you will face.”

73.5% of the 324 sub-governors declared that encouraging sub-governors to use their leadership skills would improve efficient and effective delivery of public services. Another 21% also partly agreed with this statement whereas only 5% disagreed. This 95% agreement shows the highest level of agreement on a statement in this study.

Finally, the sub-governors were asked about their views on what prevented them from exerting their leadership skills. On the basis of the answers from the 325 respondents, the most important factor seems to be “the intervention by the superiors”. 65.2% of the interviewed 325 sub-governors pointed out this reason as a major factor. The second most important factor limiting sub-governors in exerting their leadership skills seemed to be “the intervention by the representatives or local politicians”. 60% of the respondents saw this as another important factor. Other factors involved such issues as “inability to determine the people whom sub-governors work with” (54.5% of the 325 respondents), “a lack of correlation between successful leadership and promotions” (52%), “the intervention by the central government” (44%), “higher risk of audits for initiative taking sub-governors” (43%), “rule driven structure” (43%), “inadequate personnel and administrative capacity” (42%), and “high rate of rotation among sub-governors” (25.5%). The total of the percentages does not add up to 100% since the sub-governors were given the choice of writing down more than one reason or factor.

## **6. Conclusion and policy implications**

The findings of this study shed some light on the leadership problems associated with the sub-governorship in Turkey so that some suggestions could be developed to solve these problems and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the system of public administration in general and governorship and sub-governorship specifically.



The findings suggest that the system of Turkish public administration does not encourage sub-governors to take responsibility, initiative or risk. Besides, it does not allow sub-governors to determine with whom they will work and, thus, they are not able to create a team-work environment. Moreover, the interventions by their superiors, politicians and central government seem to play a very critical role in limiting sub-governors' capacity and opportunities to exert leadership. Furthermore, Turkish public administration has some financial, organizational, managerial and personnel shortcomings. For example, there are still some problems with regard to recruitment, employment, promotion and training of sub-governors. Similarly, the administrative system is not highly and systematically performance, result and success oriented. Thus, it tends to hinder leadership among the sub-governors. Accordingly, the sub-governorship as a career does not look attractive to many skillful and well-equipped people in Turkey so the number of the sub-governors with strong leadership skills is limited in Turkish public administration. The administrative reform efforts in Turkey ought to take these findings into consideration.

However, the study provides some promising findings. A great majority of the sub-governors think that their job requires them to act as leaders and thus take initiatives and risks in their job despite a rule driven, discouraging, politicized and bureaucratic administrative system in Turkey. The most noteworthy finding of this study is that 95% of the 324 sub-governors declared that encouraging sub-governors to use their leadership skills would improve efficient and effective provision of public services. This finding suggests that if the sub-governors are provided with some support and encouragement, their managerial and leadership capacity and success could be improved. Of course, this would also require a change in administrative culture and climate in Turkish public administration, and continuous organizational improvement, learning and reform. Moreover, the sub-governors should be vested with more administrative leverage, financial and administrative capacity and longer stays for each rotation in their districts. Such strategies would help increase the capacity, effectiveness and power of the sub-governors as leaders to lead change and development more successfully and take more responsibilities and initiatives.

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